Old-fashioned and forward looking: Neoliberalism and nostalgia in *The Daring Books for Girls*[1]

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"There are three friends in life: courage, sense, and insight". (Buchanan & Peskowitz, "The Double-Daring Book for Girls" 63)

An apparent resurgence in gender-specific marketing of children's products has been linked to post-millenial anxieties about the destabilizing of categories such as gender and nationality. Although links might be traced to past patterns of gender segregation in children's print culture, in this paper we are interested in tracing incongruities in texts in the present context. In this paper we critically analyse the *Daring Book for Girls* series (Buchanan & Peskowitz) which was a publishing sensation both in the original US version and its sequels, including the Australian adaptation which quickly followed on the heels of the original. The inspiration for the series came from the *Dangerous Book for Boys,* originally published in the UK in 2006 by bothers Conn and Hal Iggulden, one of whom had been a teacher. Following the success of these books, the Girls' Daring books were a direct response to the boys' books. Andrea Buchanan and Miriam Peskowitz, two U.S. authors of mothering books[2], approached the Iggulden brothers to use their design and concept to write a girls' version.

This gender segmentation is not new in children's publishing. *The Daring Books* draw heavily on Victorian girls' manuals, evoking a period when "…civilized societies evidenced strict separation of men and women and precocious girls [were believed to] contribute to social degeneration, racial suicide, and imperial decline", as

noted by Nancy Lesko (188). Nevertheless, with the publication of these separate boys' and girls' series, the texts are symptomatic of a recent and growing trend in the contemporary marketing of children's media and consumer culture. As American theorist of material culture Ellen Seiter suggests, with the recognition that a separate and lucrative niche market existed for girl products, an intensification of selling to girls and boys separately emerged in the 1980s (Seiter in Kenway & Bullen 49). However, separate products for boys and girls represent more than simply increased profits; they also imply something about the reinforcement and perhaps resurgence of gender binaries, shifting notions of masculinity and femininity, and the promotion of particular gendered identities as both legitimate and preferred. The tenor and vigour of these renewed campaigns in popular culture reflect what media theorist Diane Negra calls "an anxious preoccupation with structural, national and gender stability" in a post 9/11 world (51). Although links might be traced to past patterns of gender segregation in children's print culture, in this paper we are particularly interested in tracing incongruities in contemporary texts for children.

In a review of the Boys' books, Tristan Bridges & Michael Kimmel suggest that the books are responding to pervasive popular discourses about a perceived male vulnerability in light of girls' successes at school and higher test scores by shoring up a Boy Scout conservatism and sense of masculine entitlement. The Girls' books may also be seen as a response to quite a different set of popular discourses around concerns about girls. The sexualisation of girl culture in the media, including focus on appearance, and the perpetuation of limited and stereotypical notions of femininity in toys, games, and story books, suggest girls face a barrage of negative influences. For example, writing for the popular press as "women, moms and teachers," developmental psychologists Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown describe consumer

girl power as an overwhelming media discourse that parents must protect girls from because it "only makes girls feel powerful when they are conforming to the cute, sweet, hot little shoppers [marketers] think girls should be" (3). In Australia, a similar call to parents as moral guardians of "tots, tweens and teens" in a media-saturated world is made by academic and "mother of two" Karen Brooks in *Consuming Innocence*. Set in this context of rampant and unhealthy consumerism, *The Daring Book for Girls* series presents a counter culture for girls and, at least implicitly, also to their mothers and other adults who are likely to buy the books for girls. With their focus on craft-making, games, social etiquette, historical figures, "girl lore" and general advice, the *Daring Books for Girls* evoke a girlhood from a previous era – the "safer" 1950s and 60s. At the same time, they also partake in more contemporary girl power discourses[3] promoting forms of femininity that replace passivity and compliance with agency, action and the know-how seen to be suitable for living in today's globalized world. This dual message is captured in the preface to the third volume – the *Double Daring Book for Girls* - which claims it is "old fashioned and forward looking all at the same time" (viii). Interestingly, the use of this particular combination is not unique to the *Daring Girls* series. Historical precedents for the dual message of tradition and progress are found in the manuals of organizations such as Girl Guides and Camp Fire USA. For example, Erin Anderson and Autumn Behringer (90) note that while the 1912 first handbook for Girl Guides highlighted skills such as nursing and childcare, it also stressed abilities such as tracking, pioneering, signalling and camping, as well as stories depicting the heroism of girls and women. Jennifer Helgren (307) demonstrates how in the Post World War II era, Camp Fire emphasized homemaking and gender differences in its programming even as it offered new opportunities to girls for international citizenship. The Daring Books

for girls evoke earlier movements through nostalgic design, activities and down-loadable badges.

We are interested in looking at what “old fashioned and forward looking” brings to bear on changing notions of girlhood. On the one hand there is the old-fashioned girl, evoking nostalgia for simpler times marked by an absence of technologies and consumer, celebrity and sexualized discourses, whilst on the other hand there is the independent neo-liberal girl, looking towards the future as a professional, entrepreneurial subject. “Old fashioned and forward looking” as it is configured in the current context provides a fascinating depiction of neoliberal transformations of femininity. The books draw on neo-liberal discourses of individualization, globalization, and the assurance of rewards for responsible effort and “good” choices. Through the activities outlined, the advice offered and the approach to life insinuated, the books invite girls to identify as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy (McRobbie 7). These daring girls are ready for what Angela McRobbie calls a "pro-capitalist femininity focused repertoire" that characterises supposed post-feminist discourses (158). “Old fashioned and forward looking” seems to epitomize the complexities of a neo-liberal femininity that has simultaneously enabled unprecedented opportunities for some girls at the same time as it has also re-coded and re-worked femininity along familiar binaries (Adkins; McLeod). As such the books offer important insights into how the production of neo-liberal identities is preoccupied with developing the habits of individualised effort, choice and responsibility (Gonick) and shaping new femininities that combine attributes previously defined as singularly male or female (Gill; McLeod). For example, in the shift from the use of "Dangerous" to "Daring" from the boys’ to the girls’ series, the authors of the girls’ books naturalize the desire for danger as inherently male and

inculcate the necessity of overcoming natural reticence for girls. As claimed in the chapter The Daring Girl's Guide to Danger, "facing your fears can be rewarding and pushing yourself to new heights will inspire you to face challenges throughout life" (*Daring* 82)[4]. Although this may be a familiar axiom, the routes through which fear might be overcome are different: riding a roller coaster or wearing high heels, trying sushi or dying your hair purple. New possibilities are offered to girls at the same time as old binaries are reinforced.

Neo-liberalism also seeks to restrain and inhibit discourses from other times, including those pertaining to equity, inclusion and social justice more broadly (Brodie). As feminist writers (Coulter; Eyre et al; Hughes-Bond; McRobbie; Mirchandani) argue, gender equity has been pushed out of public consciousness by the new neoliberal focus on individual responsibility for developing and marketing personal knowledge and skills and by increased marketization, privatization and competition. This has particularly important effects for young women of "diverse" backgrounds, and for Indigenous peoples, as their experiences of structural inequality are often erased with the focus on the responsibilities of the individual rather than the focus on continued structural barriers of race, class, ethnicity, nationality , sexuality, and ability (Giroux).

Texts such as *The Daring Books for Girls*, pedagogical in nature and marketed to girls and their mothers, aunts and teachers are part of this process of producing the contemporary girl subject. While the books draw on the theme of "old fashioned and forward looking", which is a device also used in books for girls from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the configuration of meanings are particular to the current social context. Analysing both the US and Australian versions of the text allows us to trace national variations of neo-liberal discourse as it pertains to the production of

new femininities. As theorist Wendy Brown has noted, neo-liberalism is contoured by globalized capital but is given a particular twist in each local context where it dwells (692). These local twists are discernable in texts produced for young readers, prompting such questions as: What kinds of girls are produced through these texts? What kinds of subject positions are absent? What is the relationship between nostalgia and neo-liberalism? What does "old fashioned and forward looking" entail? Three themes that thread through the books are represented by particular figurations of girlhood – the Do it Yourself Girl, the Girl Citizen, and the Nature Girl.

DIY Girl

With fourteen variations on the game of tag, the rules for playing hop scotch, and instructions for making friendship bracelets, cloth covered books and a pillowcase skirt, the "do it yourself" credo of *Daring Girls*, presents fun as simple and home-made. But, what is at stake in resurrecting what *O Magazine*'s online reviewer called "nearly extinct games"? (Medwick). For whom is girlhood being refigured through home-made crafts? From what is girlhood being reclaimed? And in what ways is domesticity a feature of the girlhood envisioned in these books? Implicit in the promotion of games and activities seemingly of a previous generation is a concern for the current state of girlhood and a nostalgia for a simpler, more innocent era. This uneasiness is part of a wider discourse on what has been called the "end of childhood" (Postman). As Australian researchers Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen outline, parents, teachers, child experts and media pundits often express anxiety about children's play, pleasure and desire, with particular apprehension directed at media. The media – in particular commercial TV, computer games, popular youth culture and advertising - is held responsible for kids' short attention spans, is seen to render them passive, to undermine their capacity to play independently, to entertain themselves

and also to threaten their creativity (Kenway & Bullen 2). For example, a recent headline from Canadian newspaper *The Globe and Mail*, reads “Relearning the lost art of child’s play” with the article outlining expert opinion that “old fashioned playtime has become an increasingly quaint activity.” It goes on to note the creation of events to counter this phenomenon, like the Ultimate Block Party in Toronto, featuring “everything from games of I spy to sidewalk chalk drawing" (Pearce A3).

Wendy Luttrell stresses that the realm of play is threatened by many converging forces, including war, violence, and the demands of the global economy (181). Play is also becoming commercialized and corporate interests intrude into children’s lives in ways not imaginable in a previous generation. In schools, over the internet and in their communities, children are increasingly exposed to marketing interests and pressures that shape their imagination and leisure activities. She sees efforts to protect the domain of play – understood as a safe space for open-endedness, surprise and cultural invention -in contrast to the more nostalgic expressions of this discourse, as efforts linked to the protection of a vision of society that entertains new possibilities and change. While there may be good reasons for concern about the quality of children’s media and loss of time for play, the "end of childhood" discourse invokes a nostalgic version of childhood that, as political theorist Frederic Jameson suggests, works to establish an order that never actually existed (527). In implying that a golden age of childhood has passed, this discourse assumes that there is a form of childhood to which all should assent and that this golden age can and should be recovered (Kenway and Bullen 3). Something interesting also happens here in the relationship between generations – a simultaneous blurring and hardening of the lines of separation.

The on-line promotional video of the *Daring Girls* series makes visible the imbrications of generational relationships, anxiety about the state of girlhood, and discourses of nostalgia in the DIY approach to play it advocates. Referring to the *Dangerous Book for Boys* that her brother and father are using in the back yard, a white, blonde-haired middle class girl dressed in pink, asks her mother, "where's a book for me? The mother pulls *Daring* out of a grocery bag and they have an active day engaging in a series of "girl activities": tying bandanas, playing cards, paddling a canoe. The last shot zooms in on the two parents exhausted, on the bed, fully clothed. Tucked in beside the father is the *Dangerous Book*, beside the mother, the *Daring Book*. Besides reinforcing male/female binaries, the video suggests that the books are meant to be as much a parenting guide as they are a roster of activities for kids. Indeed, the books seem to be more about bringing the generations together in new ways than about generating play between peers.

The "end of childhood" discourse, as Kenway and Bullen point out, is closely related to anxieties about parenting. They cite the work of Australian sociologist Hugh Mackay, who suggests that new family forms, work patterns, and technologies create complicated lives. Competing demands makes "connecting" with children and giving them "quality time" issues fraught with anxiety (79). The *Daring Girls* series seem to purposefully address this anxiety with its DIY activities and, in the process, to shift the idea of the parent as the authority figure (common in previous generations) to the idea of the parent as companion of the child. This view of parenting is also echoed in the Globe and Mail article previously mentioned, which ends with an expert opinion from developmental psychologist Dr. Golinoff, that "the best toy a child can have is a parent" (Pearce A3). In other words, even as the books render a nostalgic

view of a time when childhood was simpler and more innocent, they create generational relations that are unambiguously of current times.

While the *Daring Girls* books may be marketed as a curative for anxious parenting, the focus on craft activities as a route back to childhood innocence also references what Elizabeth Groeneveld has called a broad explosion of interest in DIY crafting that occurred in the early 2000s and, notably, could be found in what she describes as third-wave feminist magazines. Theorizing the meaning of this trend in the current context, Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfram Cox suggest that crafting activities function as a "remedial response to the Information Society" (Minahan and Cox 8). A writer in *Bust,* a U.S. thirdwave magazine, opines that "new knitters know that it is possible and, in fact, preferable to "have it all" – a life that embraces both computer engineering and knitting. Their knitting provides a necessary balance from their hours in front of computer terminals, phones, consumers" (Melville in Groeneveld). The Australian equivalent *Frankie* magazine advertises June 11, International Knit in Public Day, on its online home page. There is an echo of "old fashioned and forward looking" in this call to knit, a leisure activity associated with domestic femininity from an older generation as a counter to the stresses of the public sphere and paid work. In asking what the political implications of reclaiming these kinds of domestic pursuits are, Groeneveld outlines a complicated relationship between a third-wave revaluation of domestic activities (frequently devalued in public culture) and the DIY approach of the 1960s and 70s, which tied crafting to a progressive politics of environmentalism and anti-capitalism (269). She concludes, however, that emergent feminist craft cultures are politically ambiguous because of the varying degrees of complicity and resistance at play Inherent to the discourses of DIY craft-making movements of the 1960s and 1970s is a critique of consumption;

these discourses are strikingly absent from third-wave periodicals. In such publications as *Bust* (or *Frankie*), the promotion of crafting bridges the realms of commercial and DIY cultures (274). Moreover, knitting (as a leisure activity) is often associated with a private, feminized sphere, yet the class privilege associated with such a sphere often remains unmarked in the magazines. The identification of particular kinds of domestic activities as "crafting" is thus coded in ways that have middle or aspiring middle- class dynamics (Groeneveld 264). Such coding also seems to be a feature of the *Daring Girls* series, as we discuss later.

Daring Girls attempts to bridge other, equally complicated, relations, for instance the relation between "tradition" and technology. Discourses of "the end of childhood," which, as we previously discussed have embedded within them a critique of media and technology, merge with those of crafting as both remediation and as a source of girls' "empowerment". Like the DIY crafting books of the 1960s and 1970s, targeted to a general readership and not specifically to girls, the organization of "chapters" of *Daring Girls*' eschews categorization, moving easily from topic to wildly divergent topic – from making backyard tents, to drawing a face to making daisy chains and ivy crowns (Smith 210). Rochelle Smith points out, however, that there are also some significant differences in crafting books currently produced and those from the 1960s and 1970s. These differences are also relevant for understanding the kinds of girls produced in *Daring Girls*. According to Smith, in the crafting guides of the 1960s and 1970s, there is a blithe approach that celebrates an enthusiasm for learning in the moment and fearlessness about in-exactitude and mistakes. In contrast, she argues that 21st C craft books confront a very different set of conditions, in which few skills can be assumed and letter-by-letter directions are vital. The pedagogical model of current craft books is one of very detailed plans for clearly defined and

named projects (214). *Daring Girls'* approach is in line with the latter set of books. The activity instructions leave little room for experimentation or innovation. Instead, the books offer frequent warnings, such as the one that comes after the directions for how to fry an egg on the sidewalk in *The Pocket Daring Book for Girls*: "there is a fine line between daring and reckless" (89). The authorial tone is not conversational, but rather authoritarian. There is a hierarchy evident in the way the activity instructions are conveyed: this is an expert addressing a novice. For example, in the section "How to Knit" in the Australian edition, the directions begin: "Hold the needles in a comfortable position in each hand – more loosely than a pencil grip or as you would a knife or fork" (247). Alongside instructions for fun activities, the authors often include "educational" information. For example, in the original US edition, readers learn that friendship bracelets were originally part of Native American life, particularly in Central America (99), and that playing cards originated in China (50). As Smith notes, the issue is where the "self" in do-it yourself resides, whether in the originating of a creative concept or in the execution of manual tasks to order (214). *Daring Girls* seems to position the DIY self as a follower of instructions and a depot for interesting facts. As we will outline in the sections to follow, in many ways this is closely linked to a neo-liberal notion of subjecthood.

The girl-citizen

The American and Australian editions of *The Daring Books for Girls* and the sequel, *The Double Daring Book for Girls*, are most certainly products of our times. In the early part of the twenty-first century countries such as America and Australia continued to negotiate ideas of cultural diversity, continuing earlier discourses of the previous forty years that advocated for global harmony, racial tolerance, and diversity.

The production of the girl as an appropriate citizen in a diverse multicultural society is achieved through her domestication and the homogenisation of diversity. The books produce a "safe diversity" for the girl citizen, despite the rhetoric of daring that underpins the series.

The claims that we live in a world where everyone has an equal chance at success--claims at the centre of liberal humanist ideologies--have played an important role in texts for young adults, normalising and strengthening the idea of a racially tolerant, multicultural girl who respects others, plays with everyone, and is open to difference (Lampert). A fascination with “other cultures”, however, is not entirely new. References to other cultures were also present in Victorian magazines such as *Girls Own Paper* but were bound up at that time with explaining the girl citizen's responsibilities for strengthening the Empire (Tedesco 28). Likewise, and with historical precedent, it is impossible for contemporary books such as the *Daring Girls* series to be produced without representations of girls of colour, or inclusion of topics supporting cultural diversity, albeit for different reasons than those of the Victorians. Though a little shakily after September 11, the idea of a world in which children of ethnic and cultural diversity work and play together in harmony still has considerable cultural capital, and it is likely no editor would have accepted a "girls manual" without at the very least a token nod to multiculturalism. The question is how diversity is represented in these books and with its relationship to imagined readers. In an analysis of *The Daring Books for Girls* as neo-liberal texts, the inclusion of cultural diversity may be interrogated on numerous grounds. How inclusive are these representations? What purpose is served by the representations of cultural diversity? How does cultural diversity "sell" particular ideas about girlhood in these times? Cultural diversity in the series sells the idea of cultural diversity in a variety of ways:

as evidence of tolerance, as a way of defining social position (being "educated" and offering topics of conversation at social events) and, perhaps, as a means of linking feminine attributes to the past while simultaneously claiming open-mindedness.

The girl imagined in The *Daring Girls* series must always demonstrate her ideological goodness, showing evidence of her strength of character on a range of issues including her tolerance of difference. Implicit in the daring-girl credo is the need to learn about the Other, a credo that is accompanied by gentle pressure on girls to make "a big difference" (*Double Daring* viii): "Enjoy yourself, learn new things, and lead an interesting life" (*Double Daring* viii). The books remind girls of the importance of tolerance, observing that "travelling to distant countries and experiencing different cultures is extremely daring…but the rewards often more than make up for the challenges" (*Australian Edition* 74). Nonetheless, the section in *The Double-Daring Book for Girls* entitled, "How to say hello, good-bye and thank you around the world" illustrates the generally superficial way culture is approached. (246). For instance, readers are invited in this section to engage with a bit of "foreign" vocabulary (ways to say "hello" in many languages), but this knowledge appears to work primarily as evidence of their social class training and good manners. Like the quick vocabulary guide that might be found at the end of a travel guidebook, the *Daring Girls* series functions as another kind of guidebook or pedagogical tool that girls may use in their journey to proper womanhood. Learning small, manageable (even trivial) amounts about cultural difference is all that is required. Thus, instruction is given on how to make a piñata (*Double Daring* 114), tie a sarong (*Double Daring* 98) or a sari (*Daring* 28), or plan a Japanese tea ceremony (*Double Daring* 84), but the subjects of this instruction themselves – the readers –are learning *about* unusual and exotic practices of others rather than embracing their own. In this way, in

imagining herself as adequately global, the reader of *Daring Girls* is invited to participate in political and cultural economies that allow her to consume experiences of non-White, Third-World and Indigenous Others and this consumption is validated as part of a broader neo-liberal entrepreneurial agenda of global self-making. Once again, the White gaze employed by the *Daring Girls* books is not new. Shari Huhndorf notes the same gaze in earlier Scout manuals with their near-obsession with Indian lore as seen through White eyes.

That this global citizen is imagined as White is evident in the use of pronouns, and in the address to the reader in the *Daring Girls* books. For instance, in the Australian edition, the section entitled "Learning a Little Yolŋu", an education in an Indigenous Australian language is seen as a tool to impress others. The text asks the reader, "your friends may be able to book a hotel room in French or recite the days of the week in German, but how many of them can describe the low, rumbling noise a tractor makes in the distance in Yolŋu?" (15). Not only does the claim position readers as white (clearly not one of the "Aborigines in Australia" who speak the language), but it puts learning the language (and later in the book learning to play the didgeridoo) in the same category as knowing the answers to Trivial Pursuit or dinner-party conversation. The references to Indigenous Australia are among the most problematic of the cultural representations in all of the books, in that Indigenous Australians are talked *about* (as exotic other) but completely dismissed as potential readers of the books. When the readers of the Bush Tucker chapter are told, for example, "But few non-Indigenous Australians know their quandongs from their warrigal greens!" it is clear that the possibility of Indigenous Australians as readers has never even been considered (69-70). In addition, the presumption that all Indigenous Australians eat bush food essentialises the culture in problematic,

exoticising ways. Though the American edition offers biographies of black female slaves like Harriet Tubman and the first black American opera singer Marian Anderson as examples of heroism, the Australian edition makes little effort at such inclusiveness, possibly as a result of the fact that the books, despite their attempts to capture the Australian market, have been written by American authors

These are texts that shy away from political change. Readers are instructed in Japanese t-shirt folding (*Australian Edition)* 266) and karate moves (80-81), but told nothing of how to raise money for tsunami relief nor are they offered ways to debate sending troops to Afghanistan. There is nothing at all about the Middle East beyond praise of ancient history in the chapter on Queens of the Ancient World, where pre-Islamic Syrian Queen Zenobia features in the Australian edition (263), and ways to say "hello goodbye" in Arabic in the *Double Daring* edition (246). The type of multiculturalism presented in the series is about "wearing" culture as one might wear a sarong (98). It represents inclusive assimilation, not transformation. It posits that we are all the same in a harmonious world where everyone has an equal chance of success. All girls, should strive to be the "best they can be" no matter their ethnicity or social class. This is very much a neoliberal sentiment, dependent on the idea of individualism and disregarding of many harsh realities of the West revolving around women of colour and poverty, racism and disadvantage. Never mind. In the *Daring Girls* books any girl may learn to make a Native American dream catcher, play boccino or say hello in Swahili. There are no real change agents amongst these gently daring girls.

Culture also marks the difference (and intersection) of the "modern" girl with the "traditional" girl. The ethnic examples in the books are all of "old" and traditional

arts. There are few contemporary versions of non-White girls, though illustrations do represent girls of colour skipping rope (*Daring* 27). In general, however, readers are told about the Persian Queen Artemisia from fifth century BC (*Daring* 40) but nothing of Islamic feminism in our times. The introduction to the *Double-Daring* book makes its desire to retain "old-fashioned" girlhood in modern times overtly clear with the already mentioned first statement that daring is a "remarkable word: old-fashioned and forward-looking all at the same time" (1). With respect to cultural diversity, however, the "old-fashioned" wins out as the historicized and romanticized Other is praised in past tense and largely invisible in the present. Readers can be awed by the accomplishments listed in five chapters in the original edition on "Queens of the Ancient World" or, in the *Double-Daring* edition by "Women Astronomers in Antiquity" (7), by the women whose lives feature in "Stories from the Underground Railway" (132-135), or the "Notable Women: Arts and Letters" (235-239) but they are provided with few contemporary role models of women of colour to emulate in these texts.

As well as cultural citizenship and subjectivities, the girl citizens of these books can also be read through an overtly political lens. In a neoliberal era that valorises the individual over the collective, the market over the social, the global corporation over the nation state, the *Daring Girls* series is ambivalent about contemporary politics and the responsibilities and opportunities of democratic citizenship. Distinct variations are apparent between editions, which perhaps reflect differences in political systems between Australia and America. For example, the first (U.S) edition contains a list of 55 Modern Women Leaders (179-180), and the preamble and the ten amendments of the 1791 US Bill of Rights which “form our basic sense of what it means to be American. These are the laws that now protect our

freedom of religion and speech, our independent press, our right to assemble peacefully... to bear arms... to be granted fair and speedy trials, and protect us from cruel and unusual punishment" (195). Although the 19th amendment, granting the right to vote to women, is outlined (197), there is no discussion about voting, how it operates and what it might mean in a democracy. Considering that the book has given such intricate instructions on so many other games and procedures, including such "adult" pursuits as negotiating salaries, this is a striking omission. The Australian edition, in contrast, in a chapter entitled "Women in Government," provides a detailed description of the structure of Australian government, a considerably expanded description of the history of women's "Right to vote" (180-181), and a "Women in Australian politics timeline" (including a photograph of then Deputy Prime Minister, later Prime Minister Julia Gillard), as well as the equivalent list of "Modern Women Leaders" (182-182) that appeared in the first edition. The American *Double-Daring Book for Girls* redresses this for their readers with an extensive elaboration of the US political system in a chapter entitled "How to become President of the United States of America" (153-157). This focus in both Australian and the North American edition maintains the individualistic and competitive ideology of neoliberal politics, and, at least in its title, eschews discourses of participation for those of celebrity.

Nature-girl

As we noted in the section on DIY girl, the *Daring Books for Girls* are overt in their nostalgia for a time when they suggest that girls played outdoor games and were generally more physically active. Although the childhoods of girls today might be "cooler" with their "email accounts, digital cable, iPods and complex video games", the authors begin their introduction to the first edition with an evocation of their own

girlhoods “before the Web, cell phones or even voicemail” (viii). They recall, in contrast, walking to school, riding bikes, spending hours alone outside playing ball games, building forts and transforming suburbia into the “perfect setting for covert ops, impromptu ball games, and imaginary medieval kingdoms" (viii). The implication in this nostalgic binary is that the inventiveness of imaginative play and their capacity for improvisation placed the girls of the past beyond practices of consumption. This is another of the elusive freedoms that the *Daring Girls* series holds out to contemporary girls.

The trope of the body outdoors also resonates with older discourses of physical health and competence for girls that were central to early publications for girls. Physical health, constituted in opposition to feminine frailty, has long been an important element of appropriate citizenship for young women. American literary historians Claudia Nelson and Lynne Vallone, for example, cite a girl from 1876 who, with "laughing defiance...bares her wrist, throwing into relief muscles like harpstrings" (1). They stress that, rather than monolithic, girls' cultures have always been multivocal (2). Our intention in this section of the paper is to work into the ambiguities of physicality for the Daring girls of the present.

Competent management of the physical body is also a key theme for contemporary neoliberal discourses of individual responsibility and self-invention. Australian educationalists Jan Wright and Gabrielle O'Flynn argue that physical ability or “embodied capacity” has “particular salience in a consumerist "performance" motivated market economy” (2). The daring girl who is instructed in the original edition on “How to negotiate a salary (for dog-walking, errand running, babysitting – or anything)” (236-237) is also the girl who learns to do cartwheels and karate. The girl-citizen who learns Public Speaking (238-239) and how to chair a

meeting (213-219) is also the good sport who knows and abides by the rules of basketball, netball, softball, bowling, and two versions of jump rope. As the previous section suggested, the daring girl envisaged in these books is a raced (white) and classed (middle) girl. The opening lines of the original Daring Book for Girls (viii) invoke a wired and cyber savvy girl of the present whom the authors intend to get away from the techno-toys her mother didn't have, to get moving and into the outdoors. That outdoors includes suburban spaces for more or less organised play and for (quasi)wilderness experiences. The books assume an able-bodied and active girl reader, in contrast to the contemporary spectre of the obese and inactive teenager. Ability could be considered as another axis of privilege in the books alongside middle-class and Whiteness.

Although feminist deconstructions of the culture/ nature binary demonstrate how masculinity has been aligned with culture, technology, and the mind, and femininity with nature, body, and matter (e.g. Gannon & Davies), there is a relative absence of contemporary feminist discussion of discourses of girls and nature/ the outdoors[5]. Recent research into girl cultures has been dominated by work on popular culture, consumption and sociality and investigations of girls' physicality are predominantly school based (e.g. Aapola et al.; Driscoll; Jackson, Paechter & Renold).The *Daring Books for Girls* have almost nothing to say about school or school related activities. Rather, they envisage a girlhood without schedules and without homework (despite all the autodidact opportunities within their pages). The girl who is "made up" within their pages lives in a boundless time which, apart from the "snowballs" instruction for days when school might be closed (*Daring* 69), seems most like an endless summer holiday when days are long enough and weather benign

enough to cram in as many outdoor activities as possible. This too may resonate with earlier projects to regulate otherwise unstructured time for girls.

Apart from the organised games whose rules are elaborated within the series, the daring girl is portrayed in a range of wilderness contexts. The girl in the first book learns how to paddle a canoe (165), build a campfire (127), and sleep out in a tent (117). These experiences are quickly domesticated as campfire songs are seen to be just as fitting for "the school bus, or in the car... summer camp or family sing-a-longs" (129) as for the great outdoors, and the tent is as likely be in "your backyard [as in] the Rocky Mountains" (128). Wilderness fantasies thread through these chapters – inviting the girl to imagine herself beyond the confines of suburbia but always with the *Daring Books* by her side. Even if she is building her campfire by tents and trees (but not too close, as advised), after the hotdogs, marshmallows or "smores", the daring girl is advised to "crack open" her copy of the *Daring Book for Girls* so she might better follow the words for the campfire songs or the instructions for spooky ghost stories (128). The girl reading instructions on how to accurately paddle a canoe is co-opted into a fantasy otherworld where she is invited to imagine herself dangling her hand into water to "touch the mussels that cling tight in willow shoals, or slip into creeks and shallow wetlands to drift silently alongside cormorants, osprey and swan" (165). The canoe is also part of a more familiar world of girlhood sociality where "sometimes you need to be alone and your canoe is there for you" or she might "want to adventure with a friend" or enter a literary imagined world with "Huck Finn (floating down the Mississippi" (165). This nature girl, equipped with canoe and rope, and familiarity with canonical children's literature, is encouraged to imagine other scenarios of adventure where she "might find a stray canoe that needs to be towed to shore" or "[p]erhaps the tide has gone out in a creek and you need to hop out of the

boat and pull your canoe back to deeper waters" (166). Although the girl can only actually sing songs, drift in a canoe and eat smores, the promise of the text is that she will be able to make her way in the wilderness if should she ever find herself there.

The U.S Hiking chapter in the original *Daring Book for Girls* provides an eclectic compilation of wilderness facts and advice (246-248). Although some description of topographical maps is provided, including an explanation of the "mysterious squiggly lines on the map [that] show elevation", the largest proportion of this chapter is given to other modes of reading the land. Diagrams of hooves and footprints fill one page so that girls can identify the tracks of species ranging from moose to white footed mice, or so they can accurately distinguish between the tracks of the snowshoe hare and the cottontail rabbit (247). Learning to read these signs is an aspect of nature girl's daring education. For example, the leaves of common North American forest trees are printed in this section so the novice hiker can tell a white oak from a white ash (as long as it is summer and she has a single leaf rather than a full tree to identify). Longer descriptions are provided alongside photographs of common North American birds in the chapter on Birdwatching where girls are advised, "you must become part of nature rather than stand outside of it" (174-176). However, the extensive discussion of poison ivy stresses that would be hikers must stay on the trail and beware as "poison ivy takes so many forms and seasonal colours that the best advice is to stay far from all three-leaved plants – on the ground, vining up trees and hanging from overhead" (248). There is an inherent ambivalence in the daring girl's relationship to nature.

Danger must be considered carefully in any wilderness context. The equivalent Bushwalking section of the Australian edition is explicit about the dangers of the "vast, empty, quiet wilderness" of the Australian bush (131). Antipodean nature

girls are (wisely) warned to seek out expert advice before departing, to leave plans, to dress carefully in a new set of Essential Gear appropriate for these conditions and to go in a group, ideally, with a club. The Minimum Impact Code of Bushwalking is explained for the responsible and wilderness aware Australian nature-girl (132-133). Immediately following this section is a detailed chapter on the four most common and most venomous snakes in the Australian bush, with a boxed feature on snake bite first aid (133-135).

The nostalgia, and the limitations, of the *Daring Girls* series' approach to wilderness is most overt in the chapter in the *Double Daring* volume on Car Camping which encourages girls to "convince your parents to take you...many parents love to be outdoors" (93). This chapter begins with the imperative to Make Reservations and concludes with a lengthy and curiously coy elaboration of how a girl might go to the bathroom in the woods. This section introduces the problem that "you might need to do something outside that, more often than not, you do inside and behind closed doors" and concludes with the elaborate deflection "if there is something on the ground – how may we be discreet here – that needs extra attention, dig a small hole, and use a rock or stick or leaves to tuck everything away" (97).

Both the aspiring North American and the Australian nature girls are reassured that wilderness adventures are to be found not "terribly far away from your front door" (131). Each books has an explicit chapter entitled the "Daring Girls Guide to Danger" and though two of the eight listed dangers are in the great outdoors, abseiling down a cliff (or riding a zipline across a rainforest canopy in the original edition) and white water rafting, these are on par with trying sushi, wearing high heels and dying one's hair purple (*Daring* 82, *Australian* 82). These wilderness experiences are explicitly situated in highly organised and commodified operations in Costa Rica,

the Grand Canyon, or, in the Australian edition, on the Tully River and the Blue Mountains. The packaged thrills of theme park rides at Warner Bros Movie World and Dream World (Australian 82) and roller coasters on Coney Island (Daring 82) are promoted. Rather than the undefined arenas for outdoor play that authors recall from their own childhoods, the contemporary Nature Girl is positioned as a potential consumer in market driven neoliberalism withinn the global adventure tourism industry.

Conclusion

The *Daring Girls* books mobilize a neoliberal subjectivity that emphasizes progressive flexibility, fluidity, and mobility along with a celebration of a more conservative emphasis on the gender binaries of the past (Adkins). The overall premise is that girls must demonstrate strength of mind, perseverance, leadership, loyalty and their investment in traditional femininity. The implied girl readers of these texts must be all that and more – as graceful as a ballerina and tough as a cowgirl, as well-spoken as a princess but as tough-talking as a politician, loyal to country but embracing of other cultures and as dangerous as a boy but as daring…dare we say it….as girls. These tensions are exacerbated by nostalgia which itself can be understood as involved in contemporary practices of commodification. This is a nostalgia that has a distinctly neoliberal twist. With their retro design, their appeal to parents and other adults who are most likely to be the purchasers of the books, and the peculiar gendered subjectivities produced within them, the books can be situated as part of a child oriented "heritage industry" incorporating manufacturers of toys, media corporations and publishing companies that invest in "myths of childhood purity and innocence," (Moran 157). Although the books may seem doubly nostalgic in their design and ideologies, the authors' claims of "old fashioned and forward looking at

the same time" are better understood within the nostalgic circuit of contemporary commodification.

Neoliberal discourses demand that the girl citizen engage in practices of continual self improvement and self-actualisation that are enabled and constrained by practices of consumption(Gonick). Young femininity within neoliberalism brings discourses of girl power together with precarious vulnerability and increased responsibility (Gonick). Girls must have "a life plan" and become "more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives" (McRobbie 19). As in the Scout oath, girl readers must swear to "do their best", but the old motto has been reframed for new times in the Daring books for girls. "Enjoy yourself. Explore new things. Lead an interesting life."

The discourses about gender that are encoded within the series, as Bridges and Kimmel have concluded, situate empowerment for women "more as a question than as a declaration" (142), in contrast to the workings of the books for boys. As Bridges and Kimmel describe them, messages for boys and for girls differ between the *Dangerous* and *Daring* books:

> Boys hear that the world is the same: "Is it old fashioned? Well, that depends. Men and boys today are the way they always were, and interested in the same things" (Iggulden & Iggulden xi). Girls hear that the world is different: "The world is bigger than you can imagine and it's [*sic*] yours for the exploring – if you dare" (Buchanan & Peskowitz viii). Girls can dare to explore the world while boys are reminded that this is a world for the taking. Boys lead the future; girls should take guidance from the past. (143)

. [Who, then, are the "daring girls" represented in the well-received *Daring Girls* series? The desired girl of these books remains, for the most part white,

traditionally feminine and middle-class while also demonstrating more specific attributes: an ability to do-it-herself (within the prescribed rules); and an affinity with nature and the natural world (unmediated by technology,); and an understanding of citizenship from the vantage point of a global tourist (who "belongs" everywhere she goes). The texts in which these girls appear address the neoliberal present by drawing on a nostalgia for the past and satisfying the desire of a parental generation for a more "innocent time."

> *Daring the world is the thing to do*
>
> *Gotta try all kinds of shoes*
>
> *Daring the boys to keep up with you*
>
> *A girl's gonna do what she wants to do*
>
> (lyrics to Daring Girls Prevail! http://daringbookforgirls.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/10/daringgirlsprevail.pdf)

Notes

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[2] Buchanan's previous books include *Mother Shock*: *Loving Every (Other) Minute of It*; Peskowitz's previous books include *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: What Makes a Good mother?*.

[3] For a discussion on girl power as a multi-stranded discourse see Gonick, 2006.

[4] The 2007 US edition and 2008 Australian edition have numerous identical sections and in this paper we have referred to the 2007 edition where there is overlapping content.

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